

Velarde students score in RoboRAVE International at first try

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Los Alamos National Laboratory and its employees give back to the northern New Mexico community through a variety of institutional programs as well as through more informal gifts of time, talent and money.

Strengthening math and science learning is one of the Laboratory's main focus areas for its community partnerships, and the annual RoboRAVE events in Española and Albuquerque are good examples of some of the science, technology, engineering and math competitions that the Laboratory sponsors or supports.

The impact that these types of competitions have on young minds cannot be precisely measured, but events that combine having fun and learning bring about magical growth opportunities that resonate in students, parents, teachers, visitors and educational leaders far beyond the actual participation.

This year, the one-day Northern New Mexico RoboRAVE Rally, which serves as a regional preparatory event for the three-day RoboRAVE International in Albuquerque, took place on March 7 in Española and was followed by the international competition in May.

Velarde Elementary School parent volunteer Marie Martinez prepared two sixth-grade teams for both events: An all-girls team called “Perfect Pitch Tech” that consisted of Aubriana Duran, Caitlin Hice and Marie Martinez’s daughter, Savannah Martinez, and an all-boys team named “Tune Squad” that consisted of Dylan Valdez and another boy, though the second boy ended up not being able to attend the actual competitions at the last minute.

Española

Marie Martinez’s teams faced several real-life obstacles before they even arrived at the Northern New Mexico RoboRAVE Rally in Española.

“This is the first year we participated,” Martinez said. “My teams had never done this before; they were all newbies. On top of that, we had a late start, because the students did not have a stable teacher in their classroom at the beginning of the year. And I did not help matters either, because, like the students, I didn’t know anything about robotics when we began.”

Yet the Perfect Pitch Tech and Tune Squad teams did quite well at the northern New Mexico challenge, and Dylan’s accomplishments in particular stood out.

“After only having had his robot for three weeks and becoming the Tune Squad team’s only representative at the last moment,” Martinez said proudly, “Dylan received the highest scores overall, including at the middle-school and high-school levels, and he also completed the course the most consecutive times.”

Albuquerque

The next hurdle that Martinez and her two teams encountered was financial in nature, but the local Parent Teacher Association stepped in and covered the teams’ costs for the RoboRAVE International registration as well as the students’ hotel accommodations and meals in Albuquerque.

The problems did not stop there. “Dylan lost his teammate again at the eleventh hour,” Martinez recalled, “so the event staff asked Savannah to join Tune Squad, because every team had to have at least two members. Then we were sent to the wrong ballroom the first day. Finally, after my teams had programmed for three hours, we found out they were practicing on the wrong maze.”

On the second day of the competition, the Velarde students programmed from 8 a.m. to noon only to find that one of their computers had crashed while they were at lunch.

On the third day, the Perfect Pitch Tech and Tune Squad teams scored all morning against regional participants and visiting competitors from China, Colombia, the Czech Republic and Mexico.

“We were so excited when we found out during the ceremonies that Tune Squad had won third place in the a#MAZE-ing Challenge,” Martinez said. “Perfect Pitch Tech didn’t place, but they did great as well. Everyone’s hard work paid off.”

The Velarde students not only deepened their robotics skills in Albuquerque, but they also learned about other cultures.

“It was fun and challenging to compete with people from different countries,” Caitlin Hice said.

“I am glad I was given this opportunity,” Dylan Valdez added.

For a complete list of this year’s RoboRAVE International winners, check the [2015 RoboRAVE International Awards](#) webpage.

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